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What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?

How the brand house helps to choose communication tools, and how does open data fit in?

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Summary

This paper explains the experience of Statistics Netherlands in choosing the right tools for online communication. It also considers how the shift to open data fits with effective communication. The core business of statistical offices is to produce statistics for society, policy makers, researchers and other users. But the role of statistical offices does not limit to that. The right to exist for official statistics is only justified if these statistics are actually used. Therefore, statisticians need to make users of statistics and potential users aware of their products. To this end, we have to make use of the right communication tools. But how to choose the right tools?

The paper is presented for discussion to the Conference of European Statisticians seminar on "What is the value of official statistics and how do we communicate that value?".

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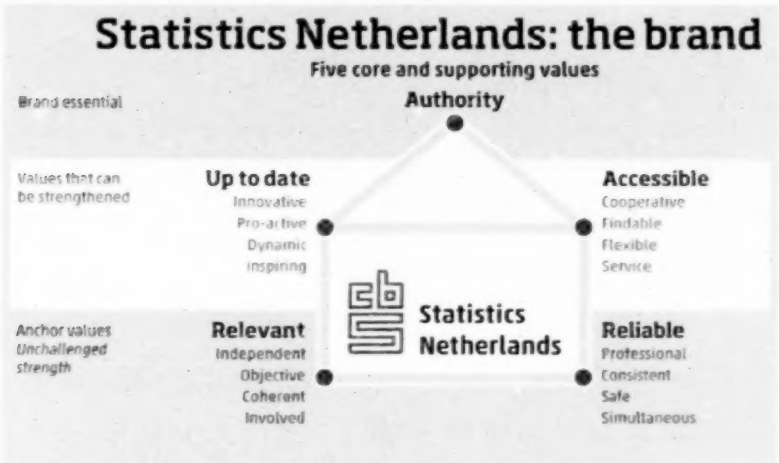
I. Introduction

1. Statistics Netherlands' mission is to publish reliable and coherent statistical information that meets the needs of society. Our "brand house" (see figure 1) gives shape to this mission, translating the mission into core values: *authoritative*, *reliable*, *up-to-date*, *accessible*, and *relevant*. *Authority* tops the brand house. Every choice made must contribute to the authority of Statistics Netherlands, which is guaranteed and augmented by applying the other core values.

Figure 1.
The brand house of Statistics Netherlands



2. The foundations of the brand house are laid by the values: *relevant* and *reliable*. These are the foundation on which the brand house is built on: the anchor values. By being relevant and reliable, official statistics aim to distinguish from other data providers. In a nutshell: users can always count on data produced by Statistics Netherlands. The work according to values *up-to-date* and *accessible* can still be improved; these are values towards which Statistics Netherlands is working. Important factors in this respect are the ways in which the statistics are published and which channels are used to do this.

3. Each core value has a number of facets. For *relevance*, for example, these are *independent*, *objective*, *coherent* and *involved*. These supporting values can be seen as further specifications of the core value.

4. The values in the brand house apply to everything done at Statistics Netherlands. That means putting them into practice when producing statistics, and also when communicating them to the outside world. Although this paper focuses on the communication process, it first describes the statistical process in relation to the brand house to provide the right context.

II. The brand house and statistical production

5. The core values are fulfilled by the quality assurance policy[1] in statistical production. The policy incorporates the European Statistics Code of Practice, the Statistical Law and the 'good practices' of the ESS Quality Assurance Framework. In addition to these European rules and regulations, Statistics Netherlands has also set its own quality goals for the statistical process and outputs. These require, for example, that the statistics are presented in a clear and understandable format, and published through appropriate and user-friendly channels (*accessibility*). Furthermore, in principle our statistics are published and made accessible to everybody at the same time, and as much as possible statistical releases are translated into English.

6. The quality assurance policy guarantees compilation and publishing of statistics scientifically, independently, objectively, professionally and transparently. This contributes to *reliability* of the office.

7. To guarantee the *relevance* of statistics, Statistics Netherlands consults with the Central Commission for Statistics (CCS) and six advisory boards, maintains many direct contacts with users, and has an active in customer relationship management policy (*up-to-date*). At request Statistics Netherlands also offers tailor-made statistics, makes microdata available – under very strict conditions and only for scientific research – and also conducts research on the behalf of third parties. This increases the relevance of the statistical information for these users.

III. The brand house and communication

8. With respect to communication, the brand house helps to choose the right tools to reach users of statistics and identify potential users. This means that instead of basing decisions on gut feeling and personal preference on what to do and what not to do, the brand house is used to check whether a tool or strategy matches the mission of the statistical office. This also makes it easier to achieve internal support: it shows that your choices contribute to the authority of Statistics Netherlands.

9. In addition, the brand house helps to clarify that tools are never an end in themselves: a Facebook account is not set up because 'everyone else' is doing the same, and making a 'cool' video is not an end in itself. By checking whether what is done fits with the brand house, the work is kept on track and communication tools are a means to achieving a communication end.

A. Target groups

10. As it is important to know who statistics are produced for, Statistics Netherlands has defined 15 target groups in the further specification of the brand house. These include:

(a) Ministries, policy advisory and analysis institutes, and the Dutch Central Bank;

(b) Local government;

(c) Media;

[1] Quality Declaration of Statistics Netherlands, http://www.cbs.nl/en-GB/menu/organisatie/kwaliteitsverklaring/default.htm

(d) Knowledge institutes and universities;

(e) Business 1 – information suppliers;

(f) Business 2 – users;

(g) Politics;

(h) Education;

(i) Register partners;

(j) European users;

(k) International users;

(l) Public 1 – everyone not in another target group;

(m) Public 2 – respondents;

(n) Statistics Netherlands' staff;

(o) Potential Statistics Netherlands' staff.

11. Not all these target groups are equally well represented among the current users of statistics, and not every core value is put into practice equally strongly for each target group. In addition, demands and expectations of target groups change, for example as a result of technological development. When the needs of target groups change, the office needs to respond. As part of the mission of Statistics Netherlands is to meet the needs of society, the office is committed to responding to these changing needs.

12. Putting the brand house into practice is an on-going process: it requires continually looking for new opportunities to reach target groups and serve them. The following section will explain how to do this using social media, webcare, the office's website and open data, and how to base the choices made in this respect on the brand house.

B. Social media

13. Towards the end of the last decade, social media started to become more and more prominent in the Dutch media landscape. These new communication forms may provide the office with opportunities to expand the core values *up-to-date* and *accessible*, among other things by widening the reach of official statistics, increasing the visibility of the organisation, and strengthening our image as a modern and contemporary organisation. Because Statistics Netherlands could not ignore this development, it decided to start publishing official statistics via social media. Obviously the website would continue to be the main channel for online communication, but through social media the office expects to reach parts of the *Public 1* target group that is not reached well through the website.

14. At the time, the possibilities of using social media were explored. The most logical choice would have been to create accounts on the most popular social networks in the Netherlands: Hyves and Facebook. They both have such a wide network in the Netherlands that many organisations thought they had to be present there. But Statistics Netherlands did not go with the flow. Hyves and Facebook require registered membership and would require users of statistics to be friends with Statistics Netherlands, which poses a barrier. Other organisations active on these networks reported on disappointing results, since many did not find it tempting to sign up as a friend for a government organisation.

1. Twitter

15. The organization decided rather to share its outputs through Twitter. Therefore, two Twitter accounts were created in September 2009: @statistiekcbs (15,000 followers) and the English @statisticscbs (1,300 followers). The work was started by tweeting statistical news releases from the Rich Site Summary (RSS) feed. That was the first step, but did not notably increase the accessibility of official statistics. Tweets were broken off randomly, making them less intelligible, and the office failed to respond to tweets from our followers.

16. Therefore, a few things needed adjustment: custom tweets were introduced to accompany all news releases and publications, and tweets with interesting statistical facts were released in the weekend. The tweets included comments on issues in the news, thus bringing the relevant official statistics to the discussion. This way Twitter drew attention to the products of the statistical office. All this was done keeping the values *up-to-date*, *accessible* and *relevant* in mind.

17. Monitoring Twitter traffic helps to find out what people are talking about, helping the organization to understand what society is interested in. This helps to increase the relevance of official statistics further.

18. Statistics Netherlands introduced a webcare team to respond to questions on Twitter: social media involve dialogue and interaction, not one-way traffic. Not replying to a tweet directed at us would be the same as not replying to an e-mail or not answering the phone. Thus, a webcare team was set up who answer all questions that come through Twitter. At the moment, this involves answering one to two questions per day. The aim is to answer these questions within two hours. This is seen as an extension of the public and press information service of the statistical office. Of course people can still contact the office by phone, but we recognise that the users also expect the office to support them online. All this helps to increase *accessibility* of official statistics.

19. This role could be enlarged further by providing webcare outside the main social media channels used by the office, for example by answering questions about our surveys on business discussion boards. Statistics Netherlands is currently examining how useful this would be. From a core values' viewpoint this would be a logical next step: it would increase *accessibility* and underline the role of the statistical office as a professional organisation, which would further improve reliability.

2. YouTube

20. At the end of 2009, a YouTube channel was launched for official statistics: youtube.com/statistiekcbs. The intention was to use the channel to show videos illustrating concepts such as inflation and gross domestic product (GDP), explaining how to use official statistics, or responding to topical issues. The main target audience for YouTube was the public and schools, and indeed it is mainly the younger age groups who watch the videos.

21. There are now 50 videos on the YouTube channel, including impressions of conferences. If necessary the videos are promoted via other channels and publications; YouTube is only the place where they are stored, obviously they are tagged and described in such a way that they can be found quickly.

22. Social media help us reach potential users who have not yet found the website. The reach of tweets is wider than that of the articles on the statistical office's website and that the media often pick up on even relatively short texts. The followers of our tweets comprise a mix of journalists, citizens and employees of various government target groups.

23. This makes the use of Twitter and YouTube very valuable for Statistics Netherlands. At the moment, Statistics Netherlands is considering which other social media fit in with

the core values. LinkedIn seems to be a good candidate in this respect. More and more of the staff use LinkedIn to exchange knowledge in secure discussion groups with colleagues inside and outside the organisation. This activity is stimulated by staff members participating in discussions relating to their expertise. They act as ambassadors of Statistics Netherlands.

24. To keep things under control – a lot of people like the idea of using social media and in their enthusiasm they are also active on social media in professional capacity. Rules need to be laid down for what staff may and may not do on social media. There is a risk that people who appear to be speaking on behalf of Statistics Netherlands damage our core values by providing information that is out-of-date, irrelevant, inaccessible or inaccurate. The rule is, therefore, that only the corporate accounts of Statistics Netherlands may be used for publishing information on behalf of Statistics Netherlands. Anyone using a personal account, even if they use it for work purposes, must indicate clearly that they are not speaking on behalf of Statistics Netherlands.

C. Website

25. The website - cbs.nl - has not been the only channel for online communication for quite some time now. But, it is still the most important channel, and the shop window. The statistics are published on it. Statistics Netherlands has been providing more and more context for the statistical data in the recent years, by means of articles, books, maps and infographics. In addition, a new Statmine tool is available for browsing through the databank StatLine. Statmine enables users to import the statistics into visualisations and make them easier to understand. This has increased *accessibility*, while keeping up with the modern times.

26. In spite of these new features and tools, the present website no longer meets the demands of users, and it requires updating in terms of design and technology. We are, therefore, working very hard on a new website, which is set to go online this year. Naturally, the new website will be user-oriented. Working with focus groups, personas and user stories has helped to realise that the new website will have to be even stronger in terms of the values *up-to-date* and *accessible*. It will have to make data even more easily accessible, be more responsive to current events, be easier to navigate, and more user-friendly.

27. The present website is based on around more than 30 themes and dossiers containing the outputs. The visitors do not always find it easy to navigate, as it is not immediately clear which information can be found where. The new website remedies this by placing the search function as central, not the theme classification. The search function will not only search the texts on the website, but also our statistical databank StatLine. Again, this will increase *accessibility* of the official statistics.

28. A further point for improvement is that it is not always clear how the statistics fit in with current events. To increase the use of statistics, the purpose is not only to provide news releases, it is also to demonstrate that statistics are relevant for issues outside the statistical office. This will be done by continuing to work with a homepage that changes daily, and responds to what is in the news, thus keeping official statistics more *up-to-date*.

29. Although an appealing and up-to-date homepage is important, at the same time we also realise that by far most users reach our website through Google and therefore skip the homepage altogether. By increasing search engine optimization the content of the website can be made easier to find, which will also attract potential users that are not yet familiar with the website of the statistical office.

30. The website is set to continue as the main channel for online communication, but there will be a stronger interaction with other online channels. Until now, the main links between the social media accounts of the office and the website have been the share icons for the web articles and links to the accounts. When the new website is launched, Twitter shall be used more widely than currently, and in the future probably other social media as well.

D. Open data

31. At the moment, StatLine, the statistical databank, already provides open data at the third level of Tim Berners-Lee classification. Alongside the construction of the new website, experimenting with a form of open data that would lift the office to the fourth level is ongoing. The national and European regulations require Statistics Netherlands to provide statistics as open data, but this is seen as more than just an obligation. Open data also provides opportunities to increase accessibility. Other people can develop apps to open up statistical data. Furthermore, statistics can be included in other applications and combined with other datasets. All of this makes official statistics more valuable.

32. In addition, open data meets society's need to receive back information it in principle provided, so that people can use these data themselves. This is positive in terms of relevance. Users who enrich these data, for example by including them in apps or websites, or by combining them with other datasets, make statistics more interesting for new users. This will have a positive effect on our reach and thus on the authority of the office.

33. In the experiment, which started last September, about 150 most popular datasets of Statistics Netherlands were made available as open data to a secure group on LinkedIn. Unlike other statistical institutes, the office built its own app to open up the data. This provided a learning opportunity: the problems encountered, helped to see better what users need. As a result of the experiment, we are able to solve performance problems that were encountered with large tables. This can be solved before a number of our 3,000 datasets are made available on the open data portal of the Dutch government in mid-2014.

34. Obviously, making open data available is a tricky business. To overcome a number of catches Statistics Netherlands is in constant discussion with the *Manifestgroep*: a collaboration of 16 government organisations who are drafting an advisory report on legal policy, privacy and licensing policy.

IV. Conclusions and challenges

35. As described above, Statistics Netherlands bases its choice of communication tools on its brand house. Using the core values sometimes poses problems: *up-to-date* may clash with *reliable*, for example. If we want to respond quickly to current events, we have to take into account that information must be consistent and thus approved by a number of people in the organisation, a process that can take some time. The dilemma is then between topical or reliable. In principle, the office would then opt for the anchor value, *reliable*. Or it could try to solve the dilemma with a new publication format. In this example, Twitter is ideal: a message of 140 characters can be agreed upon much more quickly than a 350-word article, which means that the statistical office can react to a topical issue quickly with a tweet. In our experience, the size of a message does not always say anything about its effect. Short tweets often generate more media attention than longer articles.

36. Moreover, it is often simply a question of capacity: statisticians cannot do everything. In increasing accessibility of statistics through webcare, for example, Statistics Netherlands is reaching its limits in terms of team availability. If it also wants to be active

on discussion boards it has to devote more time to monitoring of the social media. This would increase the time spent on webcare from around one hour per day to much more.

37. Although offering our users with open data would have many advantages for them, it would also pose more risks for official statistics, for example the risk that users link data wrongly or interpret them inaccurately. This may reduce the perceived reliability of official statistics. There is not yet a solution for preventing this from happening, but it requires examining data and doing content branding.

38. In general terms, this paper is a plea for not relying on one communication tool in official statistics. What will be effective depends on the goals and the image the statistical offices wishes to portray. Moreover, there are large differences between countries in the use and public appreciation of various means of communication. The lesson learned in the Netherlands is that as long as the statistical office carefully thinks about why it chooses what it chooses to do, and about what the office is ultimately aiming for, it cannot go wrong, and this may help the office to reinforce its position in society.

39. This is how we continually weigh the advantages and disadvantages of using and not using certain communication tools. As long as the core values (e.g. reliable, relevant, up-to-date, accessible and undisputable) are kept in mind when choosing means for reaching existing and new users, the users too are more likely to use official statistics. This makes official statistics more valuable, as the users and potential users recognise these core values in them. And all this contributes to increasing the authority of statistical offices, thus completing the circle.